Workers with Disabilities: An Investment in Human Capital

Queen’s International Institute on Social Policy
Skills Development and At-Risk Populations in the 21st Century
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Laura Owens
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
“It is nearly impossible to make your own future, when you are not part of the economic fabric of the culture you live in.”

Patricia Deegan
20th World Congress Rehab International
Oslo, Norway – June 2004
Employment...

- Defines WHO we are, WHAT we can become, HOW we will lead a fulfilling life.
  - Meet friends and spouses
  - Provides resources to meet basic human needs
  - Is what adults are expected to do

- For individuals with disabilities, work *is* a means toward rehabilitation.
Outdated Perceptions

- Assess employability and develop readiness criteria for entry or re-entry into the workplace
- “Place” individuals into vocational preparation programs to determine viability for integrated employment
- “Place” individuals into jobs based on availability
Requirements for expanding community employment increasingly part of settlement agreements with states

Increase employment by 6 million - 2015
Employment First

Expecting, encouraging, providing, creating, and rewarding integrated employment in the workforce:

– at *minimum or competitive wages and benefits*;
– as the *first and preferred outcome* for working-age youth and adults with disabilities;
– *especially for individuals with complex and significant disabilities*

Employment First is about raising expectations!
Employment First Beliefs

• Working is fundamental to adulthood, quality of life issues, and earning the means to exercise our freedoms and choices as citizens

• We need everyone to work for businesses to prosper and communities to thrive
Employment First Values
Presumption of Employment

http://www.poppinjoes.com/home
Integrated Employment

Robin – Best Buy
Customer Service Associate
Commensurate Wages & Benefits

Woody – JW Winco Manufacturing
Control & Power of Supports

Patrick – Tailored Label Products
Packaging
Focus on Capacity & Capabilities

John – Appletree Credit Union Teller Assistant
Importance of Relationships

Cendra – Assistant Activity Director
Importance of Community

Madison – National Maintenance & Repair
Systems Change

Sofia – Walgreens
Sales Service Associate
Changing highly ingrained culture and beliefs regarding employment of people with disabilities
Employment Readiness Myth #1

- Facility-based programs prepare people for employment

- In fact research shows the opposite is true
Employment Readiness

Myth # 2

Performance in simulated work environments for people with developmental disabilities is a predictor of employment readiness and success.

_in fact the best predictor of success is paid work experience while still in high school._
Employment Readiness

Myth # 3

We can predict who will succeed or fail in employment.

If that were the case then we would not need HR Departments!
Employment Readiness Myth # 4

• Rate of production is a primary factor in determining employment readiness

• *In fact, in today’s work environment, rate of production is only one of many factors in determining whether someone is a “good employee” – and in many cases is not even a consideration*
Employment Readiness Myth # 5

You need to know how to conduct a job search to be ready for employment

80% of jobs are found through networking with family and friends
Employment Readiness

Myth # 6

Every employer has the same employment standards and same methods for hiring
Employment Readiness

Myth # 7

Employer standards are inflexible

We are all supported employees with customized jobs
Employment Readiness

Myth # 8

Employers are expecting perfect employees
Have you ever worked with anyone who...

• Couldn’t get along with others?
• Acted inappropriately?
• Had behavioral outbursts?
• Was chronically late?
• Complained about everything?
• Didn’t communicate well?
• Didn't work very fast?
• Got distracted easily?
• Didn’t take directions well...or at all?

• Acted impulsively without thinking?
• Refused to take public transportation?
• Had a messy office?
• Wasn’t organized?
• Wasn’t always professional?
• Was rude?
• Couldn’t take criticism?
• Was lazy?
• Wasn’t very good at their job – but managed to still keep it?
Readiness for Employment Means:

- Motivated to work
- People understand themselves: strengths, skills, interests
- People understanding their support needs
- Availability of supports

THE CHALLENGE:
Actual work experience has a large impact on these factors
The element that makes a person job-ready is being in a real job.

Joe Chiappetta,
Disabilityworks – Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce
Experiences Make a Difference

- The most consistent predictor of post-school employment is Employment during high school
Individuals vary where they fall on this scale.

Individuals may shift where they fall over time depending on: age, work experience, education, financial need, personal circumstances.

**Variations in the Role of Employment in a Person’s Life**

- **Job is a Paycheck**
  Meet employer needs and be compensated.

- **Job Reflects Who You Are**
  Good match between individual skills, interests, personality & employer needs.

- **Job is Who You Are**
  Job is integral part of identify. Self-actualization.
Strategies for Improving Employment Readiness

- Person-centered planning and assessment
- Providing individualized employment supports (supported and customized employment strategies)
- Enhanced use of assistive technology and accommodations
- Providing responsibilities and “chores” at home – no matter how small
- Stretching use of education and training by individuals with disabilities to develop skills and employment credentials:
  - Vocational programs
  - Trade schools
  - Internships
  - Post-secondary, etc.
We must believe...

- That all individuals can and should be contributing members in their communities
- That everyone deserves the opportunity to find and develop their passions and interests
- That local economies benefit from individuals who purchase good and services...And pay taxes
- That individuals with disabilities, families, employers, employment agencies, schools, and entire communities CAN come together to include individuals with disabilities in all aspects of life